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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to Claire Kramsch's essay on the demise of the notion of the idealized native speaker as the model for second language learning and implications for second languages and cultures education. Focusing on French, this paper suggests that it is not certain whether the elevation of the native speaker model ever was as real or pervasive a problem as Kramsch suggests. It asks where linguistic code comes from if the native speaker norm is a fiction, noting that in the field of French language instruction, the canon of the grammatical tradition has maintained a very strong hold on the field, despite numerous calls to adapt instruction to the realities of the spoken language. The paper discusses concordances based on searches of selected corpora, suggesting that the ready availability of electronic texts and search engines can be a useful alternative to the defunct native speaker model and to the unadulterated grammatical canon. It notes that Kramsch's essay emphasizes the validation of diverse sociocultural perspectives offered by nonnative speakers, as well as aesthetic pleasures offered by linguistic foreignness, suggesting that the logical extension of this validation of nonnative perspectives, on the strictly linguistic level, challenges the field to reconsider notions of error and proponents of communicative approaches to language teaching. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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Prescriptivism, Linguistic Variation, and the So-called Privilege of the Nonnative Speaker

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In her essay on the demise of the notion of the idealized native speaker as the model for second language learning, Kramsch suggests a number of intriguing implications for second languages and cultures education. Given my own background as a linguist and applied linguist working in the field of French, I will focus my remarks primarily on the more properly linguistic aspects of the questions raised.

Despite its inconsistency with recent developments in the humanities and disciplines such as linguistics and anthropology, Kramsch states that "this idealization of the native speaker has not been put into question" (p. 359), largely, according to Kramsch, "because language has traditionally been seen as a standardized system, not as a social and cultural practice" (p. 360). Kramsch sees the holding up of the native speaker model as a cornerstone of communicative approaches to language pedagogy (p. 367) and apparently, also, of an insistence on exclusive use of the target language and concomitant rejection of the use of translation or comparative stylistics (p. 368).

I am not entirely convinced that the elevation of the native speaker model ever was, or is, as real or as pervasive a problem as Kramsch suggests. True, the placing of the so-called educated native speaker at the top of the proficiency yardstick provided by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines meant that the concept had a certain place in the rhetoric of proficiency-oriented instruction, as well as in the critiques of the latter, or particularly of this evaluation metric. As Kramsch herself would no doubt agree, the nature of the concept of the native speaker model was primarily that of a theoretical or ideological axiom. Though as such it may have had certain consequences for the practice of teachers, the model itself has never existed in any real form, since the concept represents an idealization, unrealizable by its very nature.

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Kramsch acknowledges the falsity of the native speaker model by alluding to some of the various kinds of variation that constitute departures from the standard national languages and thus "render the notion of a unitary native speaker artificial" (p. 359). Anyone who has worked in textbook writing and had to deal with the editing done by multiple native speaker readers knows very well that there are many questions on which there is not just one native speaker judgment. (Perhaps one particularly appropriate audience for Kramsch's essay would be the linguistically naïve textbook editors who insist on regarding the native speaker opinion as the last word on the subject.)

If the native speaker norm is a fiction, where *do* we get the linguistic code we teach? One could certainly speak of the grammatical canon, that is, that set of lexical and grammatical items that, like their counterparts of the literary canon, have been transmitted to us and sanctified for us by tradition. And what is the origin of that tradition? While this would be the subject of interesting research, one could expect to find close ties between the second-language pedagogical grammatical tradition and the national norms of the 'home country', though these two are of course not identical.

I can only speak with respect to the field of French language instruction, but in this case at least, the canon of the grammatical tradition has maintained a very strong hold on the field, and this despite numerous calls from some members of the field to adapt instruction to the realities of the spoken language.[1] I see these latter efforts not only as attempting to make the actual object of study more consistent with the professed object of study, namely the spoken language, but also as seeking to modify the grammatical canon to make it more closely conform to actual native-speaker discourse, with its inherent variation. Thus, in this case, recourse to the native speaker model can be credited with positive effects, in part because the notion of native speaker was not divorced from the reality of variation.

Kramsch points out that even in linguistics, the source of the native speaker idealization, this notion has generally been discredited. The gradual recognition of the problems inherent in this notion has been accompanied by a change in beliefs about research methods within linguistics. The rise of corpus linguistics, making use of computerized analysis of large textual databases, has brought about a fairly general acknowledgment that native-speaker judgments need to be supplemented by real language data in the form of corpora, which can provide information and insights not afforded by informant judgments alone.[2]

Interestingly, corpus linguistics has spawned a pedagogical application, referred to by some as data-driven learning, or simply learning

with corpora, that involves learners in discovering for themselves patterns of language use, as revealed by concordances based on searches of selected corpora.[3] Alternatively, such concordances can be used by instructors for the preparation of teaching materials. The ready availability of electronic texts and search engines suggests that this approach offers a useful alternative to the defunct native speaker model as well as to the unadulterated grammatical canon; it is an approach which has been applied fairly extensively in the field of ESL instruction, and to some extent in the European foreign-language context.[4] I myself am currently engaged in something of an experiment with an advanced grammar class where students are required to use concordances to study certain points of grammar or vocabulary. I have also recommended to colleagues the easily accessed reference provided by a search of http://fr.yahoo.com/ to answer simple questions of usage. Whether this means of tapping the wealth of available linguistic data will actually be exploited to enrich our teaching in any significant way remains to be seen.

It seems to me that our profession is somewhat schizophrenic when it comes to the question of openness to linguistic and cultural diversity within the worlds associated with the language we teach. At a time when Francophone cultures and literatures outside of France represent the most sought-after sub-field for postsecondary positions, I'm rather certain that a colleague of mine who recently voiced some apprehension about a prospective TA with a Québécois accent is not alone in his concern. Somehow, studying the literature of the culture (most often in print form, of course!) is a quite different proposition from placing a speaker with a regional dialect in front of a beginning-level class as a model.[5] And is this same bias not partly to blame for the gross underutilization of Quebec as a resource for study abroad?

It appears that our Spanish-language colleagues are a bit further along in embracing linguistic diversity; no doubt the difference lies in part in the pervasiveness of the extremely strong influence of the prescriptive norm, embodied in the Académie Française, which has characterized the French culture for the last five centuries, and which we French teachers, even in America, have inherited. At times, we are even stronger defenders of the norm than the French themselves, as when we insist on not allowing the use of French cognates which formerly differed in meaning but now have added the English meaning to their set of possible meanings (e.g. *réaliser* in the sense of 'to become aware of', rather than 'to make real').[6] Apparently this tendency to be a more severe critic than the native speakers of the language taught is something of a universal among language teachers. Lewis reports this result in a summary of several native speaker error-reaction studies in

English (p. 170), where he notes that native speakers (both teachers and non-teachers) base their assessment of the seriousness of an error almost solely on the degree of comprehensibility of the utterance. Nonnative teachers, on the other hand, almost always use a very different criterion, one related to the 'basicness' of the error (p. 170).

Kramsch's essay emphasizes the validation of the diverse sociocultural perspectives offered by nonnative speakers, as well as the esthetic pleasures offered by linguistic foreignness, apart from its communicative utility. The logical extension of this validation of nonnative perspectives, on the strictly linguistic level, challenges us to reconsider our notions of error and correctness, a challenge already put to us for some time now by proponents of communicative approaches to language teaching, but on which there is rather little consensus in the field today. Lewis makes the point rather provocatively in the following passage:

> ... Language changes, and is used creatively. ... Gifted speakers often bend and break the language into new meanings, creating according to need. There seems no logical reason why this creativity is the prerogative of native speakers, or even advanced learners. Which users of English have the right to use it creatively? Native speakers? Native speakers of British English? American English? Indian English? German English? No one wishes to lapse into Babel, but it is cultural and intellectual imperialism to impose a particular norm on anyone's use of English. Creative use, which communicates meaning, is clever and commendable whenever meaning is successfully communicated. Looking for error—deviation from some non-existent idealized norm—is a perverse way to look at language. For all that, it is and will doubtless remain, characteristic of language teaching (pp. 173-174)

The same argument applies just as well to French, German, Spanish, or any other language. I share Lewis' lack of optimism about the prospects for change, and I must confess that this is something I struggle with on a personal level. But just maybe some personal reflection and collective discussion around the challenges issued by Kramsch and by Lewis will make some small differences in our practice.

Notes

1. See, for example, Joseph, Walz, O'Connor DiVito, Blyth. Valdman (1988) argues for the use of pedagogical norms which take into account not only native-speaker norms but sociolinguistic and pedagogical considerations as well. See Arteaga and Herschensohn for an interesting response to Joseph, plus arguments in favor of introducing a historical dimension to language instruction.

2. McEnery and Wilson, pp. 1–25.
3. See Johns, Aston, Blyth.
4. See the "Grammar Safari" website, Aston, and Wichmann et al for examples or descriptions of various applications.
5. Shelly discusses some of these issues, but appears to assume that the model provided by beginning-level instructors will correspond to the standard. This is often not the case in large university settings, where graduate student instructors may often come from non-European Francophone countries.
6. See Rifelj for a study of some of these semantic anglicisms.

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